United Nations E/CN.6/2015/4

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
18 December 2014

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-ninth session
9-20 March 2015
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Discussion guide for the ministerial round tables to be held under the overall theme "Priorities for future action to realize gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls"

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 2013/18, the Economic and Social Council decided that, at its fifty-ninth session, in 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women would undertake a review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, including current challenges that affect the implementation of the Platform for Action and the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women, as well as opportunities for strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women in the post-2015 development agenda through the integration of a gender perspective.

2. As part of that review and appraisal, at its fifty-ninth session the Commission will hold ministerial round tables to provide ministers with opportunities to engage in interactive dialogues based on the lessons learned from the implementation of the Platform for Action.

* E/CN.6/2015/1.

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II. Organizational matters

A. Theme and topics

3. Under the overall theme "Priorities for future action to realize gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls", the Commission will hold four ministerial round tables, on the following topics:

(a) Making the economy work for women and girls;

(b) Investing in gender equality and the empowerment of women;

(c) Transforming politics and public life to achieve gender equality;

(d) Accountability for realizing de facto equality for women and girls.

4. The ministerial round tables will focus on current challenges and on the way forward to accelerate the implementation of the Platform for Action. Ministers will be encouraged to look ahead at realizing gender equality, including in the context of the post-2015 development agenda, to highlight the steps and measures necessary to make progress and to identify the policies that work and deliver results and the actors that need to implement those measures.

B. Participants

5. The ministerial round tables provide ministers attending the fifty-ninth session of the Commission with opportunities to engage in dialogue and discussion. They will be open to all Member States and observers.

6. Ministers are invited to communicate, in advance and preferably by no later than 27 February 2015, which ministerial round table they would prefer to participate in, as well as to provide one back-up option. Approximately 20-25 ministers are expected to participate in each round table. While the Chairs will have a list of ministers who have signed up for each round table, no list of speakers will be prepared in advance.

C. Times and locations

7. The ministerial round tables will be held at Headquarters in New York on Tuesday, 10 March 2015, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Specifically, the round tables will be held at the times and locations set out below:

Round table	*Time*	*Location*
Making the economy work for women and girls	10-11.30 a.m.	Conference Room 4
Investing in gender equality and the empowerment of women	11.30 a.m.-1 p.m.	Conference Room 4

Round table	*Time*	*Location*
Transforming politics and public life to achieve gender equality	10-11.30 a.m.	Conference Room 1
Accountability for realizing de facto equality for women and girls	11.30 a.m.-1 p.m.	Conference Room 1

8. The Chairs of the ministerial round tables will guide the discussion, with the support of a moderator, with a view to promoting the interactive nature of the round table. Interventions shall not exceed three minutes and an emphasis shall be placed on dialogue. Ministers will be encouraged to ask questions and offer comments on interventions made during the dialogue. Written statements are strongly discouraged.

D. Outcome

9. The outcomes of the ministerial round tables will be in the form of Chairs' summaries.

III. Elements for discussion in the ministerial round tables

A. Background

10. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. The Platform for Action is the most comprehensive global policy framework for gender equality, the empowerment of women and the realization of the human rights of women and girls. It builds on commitments made at the United Nations world conferences on women held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985, as well as on other commitments made at the United Nations global conferences and summits in the 1990s.

11. Twenty years have passed since the Fourth World Conference on Women. Some progress towards gender equality has been made. Countries have increasingly removed discrimination in laws and adopted laws to promote gender equality and address violence against women and girls. There have been significant gains in girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education. In some regions, women's participation in the labour force has increased. Some regions have made progress in terms of improving women's access to contraception. Harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage, have started to decline in some contexts. There have been important gains in women's representation in the national parliaments of some countries. Significant normative advances have been made in the global agenda on women and peace and security.

12. Overall, however, progress has been unacceptably slow. In some contexts, progress has stagnated; in others, there has been retrogression. Change towards gender equality has not been deep enough, nor has it been irreversible.

Discrimination in the law persists in many countries, particularly in the area of family law. Women's educational attainments and their increased participation in the labour market have not been matched with better employment conditions, prospects for advancement and equal pay. At the current pace of progress, it will take more than 75 years before men and women receive equal remuneration for work of equal value. Too many women do not have access to decent work, are denied equal rights to inheritance and property and are vulnerable to poverty. The fact that women take on a disproportionate share of unpaid care work continues to limit their enjoyment of human rights in several areas. Many forms of violence against women and girls persists at alarmingly high levels, in public and private spaces. Unacceptably high levels of maternal mortality persist in some regions. Women's already limited presence in decision-making at all levels is frequently subject to setbacks and women remain significantly underrepresented at the highest levels of political leadership.

13. Overall progress in the implementation of the Platform for Action has been particularly slow for women and girls who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Poor women and girls living in rural areas and in poor urban settlements are negatively affected by stark gaps on several indicators, including enrolment in education, maternal mortality and access to services such as water and sanitation. Young women are at a much greater risk of becoming infected with HIV compared with their male peers. Marginalized groups of women such as women with disabilities, indigenous women, migrant women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender women are at particular risk of discrimination and violence.

14. Creating a world where women and girls enjoy their human rights is one of the most defining and urgent challenges of this century. This daunting yet achievable task demands that a change be made from business as usual to real transformation. The unequal distribution of power, resources and opportunities that perpetuates gender inequalities, poverty and vulnerability must come to an end, and peaceful and sustainable societies created. This requires a renewed political will and a greater commitment from Member States to take action to ensure that women and girls enjoy their human rights in practice. A concerted effort is needed to accelerate implementation of the Platform for Action and to fulfil the commitments made in 1995.

15. During the round tables, ministers are invited to discuss the questions below and to focus on what needs to be done to accelerate the implementation of the Platform for Action and realize gender equality, including in the context of the post-2015 development agenda. Ministers are encouraged to identify what will work, what needs to be done and who will take the required steps and measures. Ministers are also encouraged to make use of the present discussion guide and to consult the report of the Secretary-General on the review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (E/CN.6/2015/3).

B. Discussion guide

Making the economy work for women and girls

16. The overall picture with respect to gender equality in the economic domain over the past two decades is one of limited progress, if not stagnation. Gender gaps in labour force participation rates have declined, but only marginally and therefore remain substantial. While more women in their prime working age are now in the workforce, the division of unpaid domestic and care work between women and men remains highly unequal, constraining women's access to decent work. Gender-based occupational segregation and gender pay gaps have narrowed only slightly over the past 20 years. A major challenge is the low quality of work that is available to both women and men, but especially to women, who remain confined to the least remunerative and least protected segments of the formal and informal economies.

17. Progress towards gender equality across all critical areas of concern has been stymied by the broader economic context, which has been marked by crisis and instability. Globalization has brought with it the threat of destabilizing financial flows and periodic economic crises that have increased inequalities and vulnerability, with particularly detrimental impacts on poorer women. The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the austerity measures that have been adopted in many countries since 2010 have further jeopardized the gains made towards gender equality. Economic crises, however, merely accentuate existing structural inequalities and disadvantages experienced by women.

18. The dominant macroeconomic policies of financial and trade liberalization, deflationary monetary policies and public sector reforms, have not, overall, been conducive to creating decent employment conditions for women or supporting public investments in areas needed to achieve gender equality. Furthermore, such approaches have often focused narrowly on raising the gross domestic product (GDP) and have, for the most part, failed to support the achievement of substantive equality for women. Alternative approaches emphasize human development, well-being, the realization of human rights and environmental sustainability. Increases in GDP are important only to the extent that they support increased investments to achieve sustainable development and the realization of human rights, including greater gender equality and the empowerment of women.

19. Ministers should discuss the following questions during the dialogue:

(a) What actions are necessary to ensure that macroeconomic policies support the generation of decent work for women and ensure that women enjoy their rights at work?

(b) How do macroeconomic policies need to be designed to support gender-responsive investments in public services, social protection and infrastructure?

(c) What can be done to address the negative impacts of austerity policies on gender equality? Looking ahead, how can countercyclical and social protection policies be better designed to minimize systemic risks and contribute to gender equality?

Investing in gender equality and the empowerment of women

20. Insufficient resources for targeted spending on gender equality, such as the implementation of laws, policies, national gender equality mechanisms and national action plans, as well as low levels of resources allocated to sectors such as social protection, health, education and water and sanitation represent a major challenge to the full implementation of the Platform for Action. In the Platform for Action, it is clearly indicated that its successful implementation requires political commitment to make available human and financial resources for the empowerment of women. It is vital, therefore, to raise the required resources and to ensure that those resources are channelled to where they are most needed.

21. Gender-responsive budgeting initiatives in countries across regions have shown promising results for the effective and efficient allocation and spending of available resources for women and girls. There are a range of options for mobilizing resources, both domestically and internationally, by improving the efficiency of revenue collection, broadening the range of taxes used to generate revenues while ensuring that they are equitable both in terms of revenue mobilization and expenditure, and national and international borrowing to finance investments that have significant social returns.

22. There continues to be chronic underinvestment in gender equality. This is a persistent problem that has been exacerbated by the austerity measures adopted in many countries since the crisis. Analyses of public expenditure by Governments on sectors relevant for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, including sectors important for achieving gender equality, show that despite an initial period of increasing spending in 2008-2009, the trend has reversed, with spending either stagnating or falling in many developing countries. While the share of official development assistance (ODA) allocated to gender equality has remained relatively stable, there remains considerable underinvestment in gender equality, particularly when aid spending is broken down by sectors. Aid focused on gender equality is concentrated in the social sectors of education and health, with alarmingly low levels of aid targeted towards economic sectors. Donor funding for women's role in peace and security and for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights remains inadequate.

23. While North-South development cooperation continues to be a primary source of ODA, particularly for least developed and landlocked developing countries, South-South development cooperation is on the rise. Specific information is not available, however, on spending allocated to gender equality in the context of South-South development cooperation. Relatively new sources of financing, such as private-public partnerships, the private sector and philanthropic foundations, also have a growing influence on priorities and financing for gender equality, but they are often focused on a narrow set of issues. A critical question is the extent to which all donors are accountable for the impact of their actions on gender equality.

24. Ministers should discuss the following questions during the dialogue:

(a) What actions and policy reforms are needed to increase resources domestically for gender equality? How do we strengthen institutional capacity and political will to increase investments in gender equality?

(b) What do we know is effective for monitoring allocations and analysing the impacts of public spending on gender equality? What are the challenges and how can we overcome them?

(c) Looking ahead, how can donors address the gaps and areas of underinvestment in ODA focused on gender equality? How can we strengthen the global partnership to support mutual accountability for effective financing for gender equality?

Transforming politics and public life to achieve gender equality

25. The goal of gender balance set out in the Platform for Action is far from having been achieved. Women remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making at all levels and in all spheres — from households to local governments, planning and development structures, service delivery organizations, national parliaments, executive governments and global governance institutions. Women's participation in decision-making is limited by a range of institutional and structural constraints, underpinned by sociocultural and attitudinal barriers that continue to perpetuate the idea that women should not have a role in public life. The underrepresentation of women in decision-making is a major impediment to progress in all critical areas of concern.

26. Women's participation and leadership in decision-making is of critical importance, both in terms of justice and equality and because the active presence of women has been shown to put gender-specific concerns on the agenda and encourage the monitoring of the implementation of related policies and programmes. Participation is about more than just how many women are present in decision-making forums, however. It is about the effective articulation of issues that matter to different groups of women and the ability to influence and monitor policies and the legislative agenda. Enabling women's participation, however, should not lead to women being the only ones responsible for prioritizing gender equality concerns. All decision makers, women and men, must take responsibility.

27. Temporary special measures have proven effective in overcoming structural barriers and increasing women's representation in national and local politics, as well as on corporate boards. The effective implementation of such measures, however, relies on political will and a strong commitment to gender equality from leaders in public and private institutions. Fostering this political will requires institutional transformation, so that gender equality is systematically prioritized and embedded in all processes and outputs. Institutional transformation can be achieved through various measures, including by adopting a high-level and public commitment to gender equality, establishing and adequately resourcing gender equality mechanisms, formalizing relationships with gender experts and advocates, supporting the equal sharing of caring responsibilities between women and men, and ensuring that women are safe from violence, harassment and intimidation within the institution. Governments and executive agencies, political parties, parliaments and private corporations must institutionalize gender mainstreaming and create an enabling environment for women's participation by addressing structural barriers.

28. Ministers should discuss the following questions during the dialogue:

(a) How can we transform institutions to create an enabling environment for gender equality? What would such a transformation look like?

(b) How do we strengthen political will to boost women's participation and leadership in decision-making? What steps and measures will result in measurable change in the next five years, in all spheres of decision-making?

(c) How will we bring particularly marginalized women into decision-making in all spheres?

Accountability for realizing de facto equality for women and girls

29. Although there has been an expansion in the normative commitments to women's and girls' human rights in the past 20 years, including the near universal ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, a stark gap remains between the global normative framework and its implementation on the ground. The Convention remains central to the realization of women's human rights, but the number of problematic reservations made to some of its provisions, particularly articles 2 and 16, continues to be a problem. Concerted efforts are needed to ensure the Convention's full implementation and the achievement of substantive equality for women. Even where States have made important advances in terms of introducing laws and policies to promote gender equality, women and girls are unable to fully enjoy and exercise their rights in practice.

30. The implementation of the Platform for Action has been hampered by the absence of strong accountability mechanisms to enable women to hold decision makers answerable for their actions. Key institutions and mechanisms for gender equality, the empowerment of women and human rights of women and girls, such as national gender equality mechanisms and national human rights institutions, are often underresourced and lack the political support or recognition they need to fulfil their mandate. Many women continue to lack awareness of their rights and of the procedures by which to claim them, including access to redress and remedies for violations of their rights. Harmful gender stereotypes continue to promote a culture of discrimination within State institutions, often resulting in impunity for discrimination and violence against women.

31. While women's organizations play a crucial role in monitoring progress and advancing claims for women's rights, the constraints on the ability of civil society to hold decision makers to account, including resource constraints, present major obstacles for women s organizations. Women human rights defenders continue to face violence, discrimination, and even death because of their work to promote and protect women's human rights.

32. State restructuring and public sector reform in many contexts has increased the influence and impact of private sector actors on the enjoyment of women's human rights in many countries. While Governments have the primary responsibility for implementing the Platform for Action and for ensuring that private actors do not violate the human rights of women and girls, there is a growing demand for private actors to be held answerable for their actions to other stakeholders. The influence and impact of transnational corporations, international financial institutions and States beyond their borders also pose challenges for accountability. States, especially the more powerful developed States, exert significant influence outside their borders, particularly through trade, investment and financial policies, which often constrain the capacity of less developed States to achieve development goals.

There is a need for stronger accountability mechanisms to respond to these challenges.

33. Ministers should address the following questions during the dialogue:

(a) What accountability mechanisms for gender equality at the national level are effective? What do we need to do to strengthen national gender equality mechanisms, national human rights institutions, regulatory bodies and national courts so that they can deliver results for women? How can we better support women to claim rights and seek access to justice?

(b) How have we effectively used the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Platform for Action to enhance the accountability of different stakeholders for realizing women's human rights?

(c) What needs to be done to regulate the private sector to ensure compliance with human rights standards and principles on gender equality?